



**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION 8**

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August 14, 2008

Ref: 8 EPR-N

Mr. David Wilkinson, Public Outreach
Bridger-Teton National Forest, Jackson Ranger District
PO Box 1689
Jackson, WY 83001

RE: Bridger-Teton National Forest Off-Highway
Vehicle Route Designation Project DEIS
CEQ # 20080238

Dear Mr. Wilkinson,

In accordance with our responsibilities under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) 42 U.S.C. Section 4231 et. seq., and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act, 42 U.S.C. Section 7609, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 8 (EPA) has reviewed the Bridger-Teton National Forest (BTNF) Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Route Designation Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). The purpose of this project is to improve management of public summer motorized use by designating roads and motorized trails in areas of the BTNF where motorized use is currently not restricted. Objectives of the projects are to 1) Designate roads and motorized trails to meet essential public needs, improve the quality of the system, and reduce conflicts, 2) Reduce resource impacts, and 3) Improve the ability to maintain routes and enforce travel regulations. The BTNF encompasses the Buffalo, Jackson, and Big Piney Ranger Districts in Wyoming. There are 255,830 acres within these districts that currently allow unrestricted summer motorized travel in the BTNF. This project includes five geographic areas of the BTNF; Blackrock/Togwotee, Gros Ventre/Shadow Mountain, Phillips Ridge, Snake River Range/Munger Mountain, and Hoback Basin/Granite Creek.

EPA's comments on this DEIS are largely affirmative due to the reduction in natural resource impacts that will occur as a result of elimination of cross country travel and a better management of the travel route system. However, a more complete analysis of natural resource impacts resulting from new motorized designations of existing routes *not currently in the transportation system (Alternatives C, D and E)* should be included. These resource impacts should be identified, evaluated and disclosed in this document (see comments on Water Quality and Wildlife). In addition, EPA has concerns regarding the process for District Ranger decision-making about public motorized use on their respective districts. The document indicates that these decisions will be made within the context of the BTNF Plan but does not indicate what

criteria, particularly environmental criteria or indicators, that will inform this decision-making.

Pursuant to EPA policy and guidance, EPA rates the environmental impact of an action and the adequacy of the NEPA analysis. EPA has rated the preferred alternative (Alternative D) presented in this DEIS as “EC-2” (Environmental Concerns-Insufficient Information). This “EC” rating means that impacts have been identified that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. The “2” rating means that additional information or data is needed to fully assess environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. An explanation of the rating criteria is enclosed.

EPA recognizes that the trend of increased OHV use is likely to continue due to population growth, advances in recreation technology, increased availability of information and improved access to remote areas. We support the Forest Service’s (FS’s) proposal to prohibit unrestricted motorized travel in undesignated areas and to designate authorized routes and uses of routes while minimizing current or anticipated effects on wildlife and habitat and other environmental resources. More specific comments on resource impacts, monitoring, enforcement, and clarifying language are enclosed. If you have questions on these comments, please contact me at (303)312-6004. You may also contact Robin Coursen of my staff at (303)312-6695.

Sincerely,

/s/

Larry Svoboda
Director, NEPA Program
Office of Ecosystems Protection and Remediation

Enclosures

DEIS

OHV Route Designation Project Bridger-Teton National Forest

General:

- Through prevention and enforcement of travel in undesignated and ecologically fragile areas, the OHV Route Designation Project preferred Alternative D will likely result in improved ecosystem health and sustainability as well as water quality and watershed protections. The elimination of unrestricted motorized travel, seasonal restrictions on routes, and closure of undesignated routes should effectively reduce wildlife and wildlife breeding disturbances, security, and address wildlife fragmentation issues. However, EPA notes that Alternative B clearly results in the greatest environmental and resource protections of all of the Action Alternatives. This alternative will achieve the greatest environmental results to meet the purpose and need of the project but would result in greater impacts to motorized recreational use. In addition to the elimination of all cross country travel in the Forest (which is common to all action alternatives), this alternative includes the least number of motorized routes compared with other action alternatives.
- The summary section indicates that the district rangers will make the ultimate decisions about public motorized use on their respective districts once the preferred alternative is chosen in the Final EIS. Will environmental and resource criteria be considered in this decision making process? For example, criteria for consideration could include: slope, distance to special areas, including roadless areas, existing conditions, stream bank and channel conditions, erosion and scour, nesting areas, areas of known endangered or sensitive species, wetlands.

Environmental:

- **Soils:** Approximately 106 miles of motorized routes are within unstable or marginally unstable landtypes. EPA recommends that the Final EIS identify unstable areas of highest erosion potential and identify mitigation practices or revegetation of disturbed routes that could be implemented to minimize impact of sediment load on streams, wetlands, and aquatic resources.
- **Water Quality:** The North Fork of Spread Creek is a Clean Water Act 303 (d) listed water body threatening cold water fish and aquatic life. The cause of water quality threat for this one mile reach is habitat degradation caused by non-point sources of pollution. It is not clear from the Hydrology section on page 151 whether or not increased erosion of soils, stream banks or riparian areas (for this stream section or others) is likely to result from more frequent or changed use of new designated routes in the Forest thereby causing further impacts to water bodies. It is also not clear whether this stream or others may be further impacted due to designation of routes not already in the Forest Plan system. It is for this reason that final route designations by District Rangers must utilize

a set of environmental and resource criteria in the final decision making process. Please describe anticipated impacts on North Fork of Spread Creek. In addition, please summarize the Wyoming Best Management Practices that would be used to control non-point source discharges.

- **Monitoring:** Please discuss monitoring of resource effects of motor vehicle use on designated roads and trails. Will an adaptive management plan be used to drive decision making? An effective adaptive management plan would include: 1) a decision tree to guide future decisions; 2) a specific decision threshold for each impacted resource; 3) a monitoring plan with protocols adequate to assess whether threshold are being met; 4) and a firm commitment of resources for the required monitoring.

Wildlife:

- EPA recommends that the DEIS include a general discussion of Threatened and Endangered Species in BTNF and a summary of findings and impacts for key species.
- Motorized access can adversely impact sage grouse productivity, survival, distribution and habitat. Although Alternatives B and D reduce the potential to adversely affect grouse populations on a mileage and density parameter, the frequency and volume of travel may be concentrated by the designated routes, potentially increasing disturbances. Please describe potential mitigation measures for lek and breeding/habitat impacts that might be implemented in addition to the buffer described. For example, are there additional seasonal closures or closure during nesting season that might be implemented?

Enforcement:

- EPA agrees with the FS that a dedicated OHV Coordinator position should be established in order to successfully implement education, enforcement, maintenance, rehabilitation, and monitoring/evaluation of tasks. EPA recommends that the summary contain an outline of the plan implementation and timeline as well as anticipated costs.

